

WRITERSMOSAIC

Faryal Velmi

In Conversation with Jonny Wright

'I'm interested in finding stories that speak about life's problems and life's issues and all the real struggles that people have to go through, but also absolutely reflect the resilience and amazing tenacity that we have as human beings.'

— Faryal

Velmi

Narrator: This is *WritersMosaic*, In Conversation. Screenwriter Johnny Wright talks to fellow screenwriter Faryal Velmi about the world of TV and film.

Jonny Wright (JW): Hi people, it's Johnny Wright here with *WritersMosaic*, and I'm here with the wonderful screenwriter Faryal Velmi today. We're in the Market, which is right opposite Peckham Rye station, near Peckham Flats, if anyone knows it. Faryal has just described it as white Peckham, but we might have a little bit of outside noise and people passing through because it's a communal workspace.

Faryal Velmi (FV): Yeah, it's a co-working space.

JW: And you have co-worked here before, is that right?

FV: I have, yeah. I'm alternating between working here and my box room at home.

JW: And which do you prefer?

FV: Ooh, I don't know. It's very—they have lots of beautiful plants and cacti. Cacti? The plural of cactuses? Yes.

JW: I reckon that's the plural, yeah.

FV: So it's nice to come here, but it's also—I haven't minded too much working at home, but sometimes, yeah, it's good to mix it up. Interestingly for me, London is—and I suppose my ongoing love affair with London, and I would say it is—and like the greatest loves of your life, it inspires devotion and despair in equal measure. And it's a big thing in my writing, actually. A lot of my work is set in London, and I'm eternally fascinated by the city because, yeah, it's—what is it, 2,000 years old, constantly in flux? And—but particularly, I'm really interested in the housing crisis, actually. But also the question, who does London belong to?

JW: Are you London born and bred?

FV: Yeah.

JW: So explain to the listeners your London story. Because you now live in South London.

FV: I do live in South London. So I grew up in North London. I grew up on the end of the Northern Line: Edgware, or maybe Burnt Oak, in between Edgware and Burnt Oak. Then I moved to South London. I crossed the river in 2004, so quite a long time ago now. So yeah. But definitely South London is home now, for sure. And it's great living quite near the river, which has always been a big thing in my life, to be able to, yeah. I guess I'm a Pisces and I always crave the sea, so you can't always get to the sea, so you turn up at Mother Thames and, yeah. London is definitely home for me and where I want to continue to grow and grow old. And also where I'd like to raise my son. And I think what amazes me about the city is that I've lived here my whole life, but there's still places I've never been to. Yes, it's ever revealing itself. And that is just amazing for me. But also I can understand it's quite intimidating for other people. However, the costs of living in London are just crazy. And it is depressing, really depressing to think that there is so many people, so many of our friends, being priced out of their hometown. And, yeah, just as someone who's definitely generation rent thinking about the future. Yeah, definitely need to go to Hollywood, I think, to afford a house in my own hometown. So that's where I'm heading.

JW: In all seriousness then, do you see Hollywood as—do you see more of a glass ceiling in Britain? Do you see more opportunities in America?

FV: Yeah, it's an interesting question. I think that there is definitely more opportunities, I would say. Also, there's just more broadcasters so there's more

places where you can take your work. It is the capital of, definitely, the filmmaking world. And increasingly, that is where a lot of British screenwriters in particular are going and working and—including a lot of my friends. And yeah, I would definitely like to work in the States, no doubt.

JW: But how do you find the writers' room experience?

FV: Yeah. I actually love writers' rooms. I definitely am, I'd say, a natural collaborator. I think the idea of getting a bunch of writers together and plotting out the world and the characters of a TV show is just the most fun thing. Obviously, American writers' rooms are different and much better paid than their British counterparts. But for sure, it's something I enjoy. And it's interesting, actually, the rooms that I go to, what people share of their own personal lives and their own [inaudible]. Some people really—I think some of the best rooms I've gone into, they're almost like therapy sessions. People really delve deep into themselves and their own histories and their own memories to give. People are very generous. And it's always interesting to see who does that and who doesn't do that. But those are the best ones, I think, because then the characters that you're trying to create—the fictional character that you're trying to create are actually born out of people's real life experiences. When they work, they can be electric.

JW: Yeah, absolutely. I've watched two of your—you've written two episodes of *Ackley Bridge*, which I watched and really enjoyed. And I've just seen bits of the show, so I was familiar with the show and the concept. And the concept of the show, for people that don't know, is a school which is actually filmed in Halifax.

FV: Yeah, that's right.

JW: Which is where I'm from.

FV: Oh, awesome.

JW: But yeah. So the concept is this show, which is—is it half Asian kids, half white kids?

FV: Yeah.

JW: It's a—been a forced integration in this school. Was that right? Or is that just the area?

FV: I say enforced. I think it was a—the aspiration of the school is to unite communities that are divided along race lines, which has definitely been the case in some parts of, well, parts of the UK. Yeah.

JW: And a big storyline in both of your episodes centred around an Asian lesbian character. And she's closeted at first.

FV: Yeah.

JW: And then there's a white lesbian who's very out. But an interesting twist is that the white lesbian is part of a thick—a racist EDF-type group, who want Muslims out and no halal chicken.

FV: Yeah, yeah.

JW: Halal meat funds terrorism.

FV: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JW: So it's a very interesting relationship. Obviously a couple which are going to have a lot of, a lot of problems. And I think you handled it—I think the episodes handled that relationship with a lot of love and care and affection. And it was really interesting. So how did you find the process of writing on *Ackley Bridge*?

FV: Yeah. So that episode, which is in season two, was co-written by me and another great screenwriter called Natalie Mitchell. And I was a fan of the show before I started writing on it. And it was fantastic to be able to write for a character who—and on prime time TV who is British Pakistani, working class, and coming out, and in quite a spectacular way, actually, in that episode, first to herself and then to the world. And it was really special to be able to write that. And I feel that the show was really groundbreaking in many ways in terms of how it really smashed stereotypes of British Pakistani, British Muslim women. I think for me as a writer, looking at contemporary British society and looking at cultures clashing, yes, but also the spaces that are created when they meet, is something that is really important and I

like to do. And we're seeing a time of change, I think, when it comes to particularly British Asian women's representation on screen and moving on the discussion. *Bhaji on the Beach*, which was a real amazing seminal film written by Gurinder Chadha 20-odd years ago, and one of the best, I think, that showed such a wide variety of British Asian women. If we look at what's happened in that time since then, there's been all the stereotypes that you can think of, from the jihadi bride to the oppressed honour killing victim, some of which I speak about in my podcast. But I think we are seeing times are changing. And I think definitely Nasreen's character in *Ackley Bridge* is part of that change, and long may it continue. I'm feeling hopeful, but also, obviously, it takes—it's such a long journey to get, I suppose, alternative representations on screen, it takes ages. And that's why shows like *We Are Lady Parts*, for example, are so groundbreaking, again, because what Nida has done with that show is that she's really been working on it for many years, no doubt. And now it's come out and it's fantastic because it has that variation, which I think is so important because we are not, as British Muslim women in particular, not one big homogenous block. There's lots of different variations. And I think that's really important.

JW: Have you ever found that there's clashes in that what—you're giving your truth. and you have other people telling you that that's not really the truth they want?

FV: Yeah, I think that can happen. I suppose, at the moment, we are in—and again, as I try to say in my podcast, I think there has been a space that's been created in terms of a recognition that there is a real—there's lack of representation of stories and of people of colour. And that, actually, there is a polarity. We're not all going to

have the same experiences. And for me, actually, increasingly, it's about looking at class as well, and how that cuts across race in particular. And I suppose it's called intersectionality, which, having lived through this pandemic, having lived through Brexit, experiences of being working class, particularly Asian person, there is a difference than—you look up at the people like Priti Patel and Rishi Sunak, and you can see there that what's at play is that, yeah, we've got the representation, but actually, whose interests are they acting in? And it's not of working class—other working class Asian people, I'd say. So yes, representation is important, but actually, for me, I think class interests are also massive.

JW: And how have you found the struggles and challenges of being a working class writer?

FV: It's hard. It's really hard. And how you survive and how you maintain an income, how you try to be able to write and to be creative and to do what you do, you have to be free in your mind for the while that you sit down. Worrying about rent and worrying about money is the biggest stress in the world. And it's—sometimes it can inform your writing, absolutely, but other times it's difficult because you have to perhaps take jobs outside of the film and TV industry to sustain yourself. And then you're not having that time to write. So it is a challenge. My journey has been a long one to arrive at this point. So I graduated from—I went to film school. I studied at LCC, and I actually graduated 20 years ago this year. And I didn't go straight into the film and TV industry after I graduated. And I think the reason for that was because I didn't have the confidence to do so because it was very low paid and I needed to earn some money. And I ended up working for an amazing disability rights charity

called Transport For All. But yeah, my time at Transport For All was fantastic. I ended up running the charity. But writing has always been my dream. And whilst I was very passionate and still am passionate about all of the issues around disability rights and social justice, I decided that I needed to focus on writing. But going freelance is hard. It's hard work. It's such an adjustment. And the insecurity of it has been really tough so—

JW: And did you have to supplement your income with other non-writing freelance jobs?

FV: I have done, yeah, over the time, absolutely. And some of that has been, I suppose, using some of my experiences at Transport For All as well. And so I recently just made a short film for charity for Birthrights, which has been great.

JW: Which I viewed, and it was about very important issues about child birthrights, yeah, essentially. Again, something I've—I was going to say recently been through, I have not given birth, but my my wife has. And actually, I was—what I really liked about the short film was it highlighted—because a lot of black and brown women are not advocated for absolutely. And doctors and whoever, medical professionals, don't value their, well, pain as much or their complaints or their needs as much. So I thought it was a really important video, actually.

FV: Yeah, cool. Thank you.

JW: Also I know that you're also dyslexic as well. How do you find being a dyslexic writer?

FV: Yeah, it's tough. And I was diagnosed as an adult so it's not something that I—definitely growing up was—I was aware that, certainly when it came to concentration and also just writing, just general spelling or sentence formation, just, yeah, it—and then when I got the diagnosis it all made sense. And I've developed techniques to deal with it and to work through it, and also—

JW: Can you share any tips for any dyslexics out there?

FV: Oh gosh, I'm not sure. But just—I think it's a real struggle because you're working at deadlines but trying to be able to have time to be able to read and reread, to break down in sections, to print out. And that's actually a big part of the process, sometimes, to read out loud and to be able to see the words in different ways, if you know what I mean, not just always on the screen. So by reading out loud and by printing it out, also to break down in sections, I think, is really important for me. But it takes longer, absolutely. It takes longer to get right. And often, as well, just, oh gosh, yeah, typo queen. Oh my god. I just—to get people to check and double check.

JW: Also, I would say from the work I've seen of yours in the *Ackley Bridge* episodes and, also, your short film, *What You Looking At?*, what I think your work does really well—obviously, *Ackley Bridge* not being your show, but you were picked for episodes that you're obviously suitable for, and I think you really deal with the intersectionality of, like you mentioned, class and being queer and also muslim

identity, and those three things, yeah, meeting an intersection, I think you deal with it really well. Are these three themes that you like to lean on or is this just a coincidence? Where are you at with this?

FV: Yeah, write your own story is a legend which I think is definitely something I've lent into. Can you lean into a legend? Yeah, I don't know.

JW: Yeah, why not. Let's try it.

FV: It's something that absolutely interests me and continues to interest me. However, I am also interested in other stories. Particularly, I'm interested in motherhood. And also the expectations that you have as a parent of your kids, and also that you have as kids of your parents. It's something I'm quite fascinated by at the moment. We talked about London and community and the idea of home and where's home, that's always really fascinated me. And will always be interested in that intersectionality that you've talked about, or indeed, all those individual identities. But certainly, growing as a writer, I'd like to—

JW: Expand.

FV: Exactly. And I am, yeah, I am doing that as well. So yeah, watch this space.

JW: We will definitely watch this space. But no, I really enjoy your work and your voice come shining through. And I think that's great as well. Do you find—you were saying, yeah, you're looking to expand. Obviously, you've got—motherhood's an

important theme for you as well, being a mother, I guess, is extra important for you. But do you find that other people put you into a box and it's like, *okay she does this but maybe she doesn't do motherhood?* Or do you find, actually, that people are willing and open to for you to pitch whatever you want?

FV: I think people are willing and open. There is a certain amount of pigeonholing that does go on, but I think people are open as well. It's almost like it's the best of times and the worst of times. It's a—when you—before you get an agent you think, *I'm brimming with all these ideas. All I need—let me get at the industry.* And then you have an agent, and you have that access, I guess. And then you are—you do go and you do put your ideas forward and you realise, *my gosh, it's not as easy as that.* And you have to pitch lots and lots of stories and lots of ideas. And generate, sorry, lots of ideas and lots of stories in order to have maybe one or two that gets somewhere. And that somewhere could be an option or—and then you get an option and you're like, *oh this is fantastic.* But actually, then you want a commission. And then you get the commissions and its like, *oh actually, now I want a green light.* And that's the—

JW: Then you want the Oscar.

FV: Yeah, of course. Of course, you want that. I'm also, I suppose at the moment, thinking about—we all know there's a lot going wrong, what's the alternative? I'm quite interested in that as a writer as well, if we were to reorganise society and the world that we live in, what would be the alternative? So that's interesting to me at the moment as well.

JW: And on socialism, actually, how does that work in an industry where the profitability of you as a writer, the profitability of your shows and films, is currency? So how does that work?

FV: Oh gosh. I mean, for me, I want to earn a decent living; I'm not interested in being a multi-millionaire, necessarily. And for me, it's important that I'm interested in finding stories that speak about life's problems and life's issues and all the real struggles that people have to go through, but also absolutely reflect the resilience and amazing tenacity that we have as human beings. I'm interested in those stories, absolutely, and bringing them to screen. That's what inspires me and pushes me forward. And certainly, at the moment, a real passion for me has been, as I've spoken before about, London's housing crisis and the fact that a lot of working class communities are being gentrified and also social housing being destroyed and people paying extortionate amounts of rent, and it's just—it's a really—it's quite a horrific situation because the city is being reordered. That is a real pressing concern and something I'm really interested in writing about. And I don't feel we're seeing enough about that on our screens.

JW: We're not. And I think you are one of the voices that should do it.

FV: I hope so.

JW: What made you want to write in the first place?

FV: I suppose it's a calling, really. I remember watching this really—I mean, James Baldwin is a big hero of mine, saying, 'Who'd want to be a writer?' And who would want to be a writer? And it is a calling, and it's something which has, ever since I was very young, wanted to do. It's interesting; I spoke about the fact that I graduated a long time ago, but I didn't immediately go into the film and TV industry. And I'm actually glad of it, to be honest, because I probably would have been quite burnt out by now.

JW: Now you've got more life experience.

FV: Yeah, that's true. I do. I'm at this junction now and, yeah, looking forward.

JW: So was it a calling when you were at school? It was just, yeah, what did you see? Were there movies you saw or books you read and you're like, *I want to do this*? Or, yeah, how did this calling come about? Who called you?

FV: Who called me? Certainly, doing a—so I went to school, as I said. I grew up in North West London. I went to a great FE college that did a media studies A level, and—which I didn't start doing but got into. And we had a great teacher there who showed us loads of films, in particular, films like Ken Loach and also Mike Leigh. That is where it really sparked my interest of writing and my love, really, of films and of TV. I applied to go to film school and it, yeah, just all started from there.

JW: And do you think, going back to Mike Leigh and Ken Loach, with their work and talking about lots of socialist-type of things and working class issues, where do you

think the next Mike Leighs and Ken Loaches are? There doesn't seem to be that many people that have followed in their footsteps in that tradition. And I wondered, well, if you agree with me and why you think that is?

FV: They are very iconic, but I think there are a number of, within the independent British film scene, that are making films that are very relevant and telling the stories of working class British people. Even just recently, there was a film called *Limbo* that came out, which I really enjoyed. And there are filmmakers out there that are doing it, I suppose. One of the amazing things about Mike Leigh and Ken Loach is that they are very prolific, and because they've managed to get to that place where they can. Although I think they still have struggles getting their full finance, but they're able to do that. That is a big thing.

JW: Do you think there's still hope out there for the socialist filmmakers?

FV: Yeah, definitely. I think so.

JW: Great. You've already mentioned Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, but are there writers or filmmakers or even musicians that inspire you and who you listen to their music or watch their films to inspire your work, or just you wanted to write because of these people?

FV: Yeah, absolutely. Now, this is going to be a bit of a curveball because I'm also a bit of a—quite big Almodóvar fan as well. Pedro Almodóvar.

JW: Okay. Yeah.

FV: So his work is actually, if you think of Mike Leigh and Ken Loach, quite different. But the fact that his work is also, actually—he looks at—the recent film that came out, which is coming out, *Parallel Mothers*, he's very interested in motherhood and female relationships. And it's flamboyant and colourful. Now, let me think. So some of my peers works—my—when I really—one of my best friends, Aleem, Aleem Khan's film *After Love*, which is an absolutely stunning piece of cinema. It's been very inspiring. That has been just amazing to watch.

JW: Finally, I know you really like poetry. What is it about poetry that you like?

FV: Well, the craft. The craft and care that the poets take to present their work on the page is just amazing. You can read a page of poetry and it can elicit so many feelings and so many emotions. I'd have to, yeah, write a hundred page script to get that same feeling. And I think that is what continues to astound me, really, about poets who are at the top of their game. It's definitely a big influence. And I think it's really exciting, the London poetry scene, to go to—there's so many amazing poetry nights that you can go to where you can hear live poetry, spoken word poetry, but also page poets, as they're saying, reading their work. And I think, yeah, it's really important, and I find it really inspiring. At the moment, what's really inspiring me is a poetry collection called *C+nto* by Joelle Taylor, which is just really amazing. So I'd recommend that to everybody.

JW: Well, I think you're really amazing and you're really inspiring as well. So hopefully as well as poets inspiring you, you can inspire some poets and some other writers. I'm sure you have done. So thanks a lot for your time.

FV: Thank you. Thank you..

Narrator: Faryal Velmi was in conversation with Jonny Wright. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk.

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